

Editorial Trials of celebrity

THIS ISSUE of *Pacific Journalism Review* engages with the theme of the dynamics of fame in a small country. In contrast to the dominant focus in the newly emergent field of Celebrity Studies on celebrity as a global phenomenon, the emphasis in this issue is on the interface between the global and the local; on questions of how the distinctiveness of national and local values fares when caught up in or willingly imitating the circulation of global fame and influence. Accounts of celebrity often focus on the notion of fetishism—the complex process through which specific idols become objects of veneration whose admirable or even infamous qualities are presented as emanating from the inner recesses of a luminous personality. The importance of this aspect of celebrity and celebrity worship is not to be denied. But there is another feature of celebrity and stardom that complements and energises the engagement of fans, the interest of the general public and the ambitions of the press and media to create and sustain a market for copy. Celebrities and stars are also totems that create a sense of unity, an imagined community. Individuals express and explore a sense of collective identity, define rituals of belonging, separate themselves from others and manage the relationship between society and nature—in the case of celebrities, the nature in question, is most often, human nature (Rojek, 2012, pp. 130-131).

In the case of small countries, like New Zealand, the internal impact of Hollywood stars and celebrities on American popular culture is intensified by the fact that the celebrity system is a totemic import. Patterns and processes for rewarding talent and ascribing fame that have reached the acme of intensity in Global Hollywood, interface with locally situated systems of beliefs and values. This might be seen as a process of colonisation—and to an extent it is. But some striking features of post-colonialism complicate the situation. The first of these is that there is an apparent national prestige deficit, which is under pressure to be compensated by a chronic search for a world-class recognition paradoxically—Global Hollywood can do this, but at the price of losing national distinctiveness. Second, there is the question of what is national identity—is it a meaningful totemic mechanism in an officially bicultural society that in itself is strongly drawn towards local patriotism and kinship

affiliations and increasingly over time structured by cultural and ethnic diversity. Third, there is the matter of neo-liberalism as a cultural phenomenon, which ideally frees the market from the constraints of local values, beliefs and customs where these do not accord with the maximisation of profits. Finally, it is not just that the New Zealand national economy is small, it is also marked by sharp socio-economic inequalities—not on a US scale to be sure but all the more intense because of social proximity. As Ruth Dyson observed serving on a select committee that decided a private members bill aiming to restrict lobbyists was unwarranted: ‘New Zealand is a village. We know who the lobbyists are, and what they’re going to talk to us about’ (Davidson, 2013).

The interpenetration of these general processes creates a complex matrix of cultural argumentation, if not outright contestation, for New Zealand society as a whole. In the specific case of celebrity, these social and cultural tensions are played out in the media as matters related to fame and its deserts, on the moral fitness of those who lead and how, in the final analysis, sheer social visibility and market recognition can place these totemic functions in jeopardy.

In his opening commentary, **Barry King** examines some of the fundamental concepts for the study of celebrity culture and scandal and relates these to the New Zealand context. Of particular note is what can be characterised as an emerging crisis in the local celebrity system as this affects both entrepreneurs and entertainers and points to the proliferation of scandal as a persistent trend in the culture of leadership.

In their article, **Hilary Radner** and **Ellen Pullar** explore the complexities of star identity within the parameters of New Zealand popular culture. As one of New Zealand’s most iconic actors and stars, the public persona of Rena Owen is revealed as an elusive and unstable image marked by the complex intersections that form her biography. Born of European (Pākehā) and Māori parents, with her own history of alcoholism, drug abuse, criminality and violence, Owen has also been recognised as an accomplished actress and a ‘dusky’ beauty. This unstable combination of qualities was codified by her standout performance as the character of Beth Heke in Lee Tamahori’s *Once Were Warriors*—and its sequel. The efforts of the celebrity press to grapple with her volatile and unstable persona stand in marked contrast to the treatment accorded to celebrities such as Rachel Hunter whose closeness to the ‘white’ ideal creates an image of assured rather than problematic identity. Through the optic of Owen as a ‘moral barometer’, the authors explore the complex

interplay between racism, ethnicity and identity that marks the condition of celebrity in New Zealand.

Rosser Johnson and **Nemane Bieldt** examine the celebrity career of Suzanne Paul from its origins in infomercial programming through to the consolidation of Paul as a household name, darling of the local women's magazine circuit and celebrated cultural entrepreneur. Paul's descent into bankruptcy intertwined with her persisting afterlife as a 'media profile' reveals much about the sheer market value of a name in the formation of that peculiarly New Zealand creature, the celebrity as a market factotum.

In a content analysis of the cover lines of *New Zealand's Woman's Weekly* over several decades, **Jeremy Olds** and **Lyn Barnes** trace the process of celebrity feature production where the reportage of scandal and sexual peccadilloes found in US and UK journals is, if not entirely absent, contextualised by an emphasis on local and comparatively mundane tales of celebrity. Implicated in the logic of snaring exclusives and not regurgitating global stories, the *New Zealand Woman's Weekly* has constructed a space for homegrown celebrities that is not entirely colonised by global celebrity reporting. This 'product differentiation' is entirely coherent as a marketing strategy and it creates and sustains a cultural space where readers and advertisers commune in a rhapsody of Kiwi folkways, life style commodities and services.

Finally, the issue contains two comparative studies to set against the New Zealand context. In a study of the press coverage of another small country, Norway, **Daniel Dragaset** examines how the Norwegian media constructed and developed a scandal storyline, reporting on the events leading up to the arrest and trial of the mass murderer, Anders Behring Breivik. With the exception of the Aramoana massacre in 1990, New Zealand has remained free of such studied attempts at dark celebrity. Breivik's post-imprisonment attempts to manipulate media attention and, like any celebrity, sustain a media profile are subject to critical scrutiny. Reviewing the role of scandal as a device for building dramatic tension and excitement in Asian cinemas, **Khairiah Rahman** demonstrates how popular hits and popular stars challenge and renegotiate the 'moral compass' of the Asian cinematic imaginary, contrasting the contradictions between traditional values and the market-driven moralities of Hollywood.

IN THE *Frontline* article, **Chris Nash** reviews the recent debate about the performance and impact of the Excellence for Research in Australia (ERA) evaluations in 2010 and 2012 on the field of journalism research, in particular discussion of the relationship between research in journalism and that in the fields of communication, media and cultural studies.

James Hollings, of Massey University, continues his exploration of the regulations in New Zealand covering the media reporting of suicide. He explores the history of suicide reporting restrictions suggesting they amount to censorship. **Amanda Watson** researches mobile phone telephony in Papua New Guinea based on a survey conducted in 2009 on eight rural villages in Madang Province. While the focus of this article is on mobile phones, her research also explores media access and media usage more generally in the region.

The Queensland state electoral division of Ashgrove in 2011 is the subject of **Steve Fox** and **Lee Duffield's** article. In their study, they ask whether online media provided an extension of democracy, and what journalism's role was in democratic discourse. New Zealand's performance in the latest, 2010 round of the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) is the topic scrutinised by **Margie Comrie** and **Kate McMillan**. They found that gender inequality remains a defining characteristic of daily news content around the world, and is reflected in New Zealand newsrooms.

Finally, **Mark Pearson** explores freedom of issues and social media in the inaugural UNESCO NZ 2013 World Press Freedom Day address at Auckland University of Technology in May.

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References

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